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ABSTRACT

This document is a description of the New England Program in Teacher Education (NEPTE), which is a six-state regional program intended to improve the quality of teacher education in New England. The main focus of the NEPTE staff is its state field agents. Activities of the field agents include the following: workshops; evaluation of proposals; the monitoring and evaluating of projects; presentations of data to concerned groups; conferences with state department of education officers and representatives of all teacher education institutions in the state; and meetings with NEPTE project directors, deans of education at major institutions, and school superintendents. Topics at various meetings at which the field agents have participated have included proposed changes in preservice programs, personnel selection for site roles, and proposals for secondary school teacher training. The field agent is regarded as one having expert knowledge about a practice or being an expert practitioner himself. (JA)

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NEPTE Field Agents:

Studies in a Crucial Role

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The New England Program in Teacher Education (NEPTE) is a six-state regional program intended to improve the quality of teacher education in New England. Funded by the New England Regional Commission and incorporated as a non-profit corporation in 1970, NEPTE has established a wide variety of projects and activities designed to strengthen the education of teachers. NEPTE is governed by a twenty-four member Board, four from each state, all of whom are appointed by their governors. Half of the Board members are professional; half, community-based.

In September, 1971 the staff of NEPTE consisted of a director, an associate director, an executive assistant and two field agents who concurrently held the title of assistant director. In September, 1972, the staff consisted of a director, two associate directors, an executive assistant, and six field agents; these additions indicated that most additions to staff had occurred in the field rather than in central staff. This action implemented NEPTE's philosophical emphasis which has from the beginning been on being a field-focused organization.

There are some current national trends which suggest that roles analogous to that of the NEPTE field agent are increasingly important. It is vital, therefore, that NEPTE state clearly its own experience with and development of the field agent. What follows is an account describing the history, philosophy, and implementation of the NEPTE field agent concept.

The Beginnings

The first NEPTE Board of Directors, and subsequent ones as well, was imperative regarding its wish that NEPTE not become a heavily centralized bureaucratic program. It argued that subsequent staff appointments after the director, associate director, and executive assistant (1970) be field-based. Subsequently, the next two appointments (1971) were field agent-assistant director positions, one housed in the Maine State Department of Education and the other at Rhode Island College. The specifics whereby it developed that Maine and Rhode Island become the first sites selected are rather complex to describe here, but the result actualized the Board's desire that appointments be field-based.

During the first year of field agent activity (1971-72) the United States Office of Education asked if NEPTE's continuation proposal for 1972-73 might explore a plan whereby a specific specialist agent would be placed in each of the New England states. Both the competency and placement of the agent would be agreed upon between each of the chief state school officers and NEPTE. Over a period of several months, a proposal emerged calling for six field agents, each with a specific competency agreed upon by the state as a priority need and NEPTE as a relevant program area. In each case, the field agent was to spend 60 per cent of his time on state tasks and 40 per cent of his time on regional (NEPTE) tasks. The agreed upon competency foci were: (1) Resource Development, Maine; (2) Bilingual Education, Connecticut; (3) Performance Based Teacher Education, Rhode Island; (4) Evaluation, Vermont; (5) Metropolitan Staff Development, Massachusetts; and (6) Leadership Training, New Hampshire.

General Tasks

The presence of the five new NEPTE field agents makes the defini-

tion of role and functioning of staff an easier task. Much of the field agent role grows from the then existing practice of central staff. During the first year of NEPTE operations, central staff spent a great deal of time in field work. Some of these activities included participation in workshops, evaluation of proposals, presentations of data and the like to concerned groups, monitoring and evaluating projects. In addition there were the general administrative duties within the organization itself. The tasks that fit under such categories, however, accounted for only a small portion of the time of NEPTE staff.

There were other kinds of activities less susceptible to facile description. They increased during the second year when two field agents were added. Oftentimes, these activities appeared in the staff report to the NEPTE Board as "met with Commissioner," "met with Advisory group in Maine," "visited educational consultant group," and the like. There was evidence of considerable staff activity in such areas; but there was little indication of what took place, what was the intent, and what was the intended or final result. On occasion, some of these emerged as projects, such as the Boston Children's Hospital Project, a project designed to demonstrate the potential of alternative training environments for teachers, both pre-service and in-service. As often as not, there was little direct subsequent contact between the NEPTE staff person and the group or person met with; sometimes at a later date, a contact would ensue and this would usually be followed by another short or extended meeting in turn followed by a sporadic kind of relationship. It became difficult to describe and delineate these relationships, but they seemed oftentimes to grow out of the need of the group or individual for the kind of organizational development help or training that NEPTE staff were expert in. The NEPTE staff person's presence at one of the meetings was usually the result of

a call for assistance, for clarification, or just for the informal presence of someone involved in educational change. The more NEPTE was perceived as a service oriented organization, the greater the increase in the demand for these vaguely defined services. However, as time went on, staff was able to categorize a number of the requests. Most of them corresponded to what ultimately became the competency areas of the field agents.

New Staff

The reported activities of new staff members in the person of the field agents have made visible some of what was taking place in these instances. Because the field agents are in the most part people with a particular speciality such as performance based teacher education, it has been easy to watch the part of their role that is related to a special expertise. The field agent is regarded as one having expert knowledge about a practice or being an expert practitioner himself. His relationships with clients result from their desire to know something or their desire to have him perform a task for them. In this way, the transaction becomes highly visible. Much of what happened in early NEPTE activity with regard to relationships between central NEPTE staff and people in the field was of a similar nature, but it was difficult then to pin down the nature of the relationships. Very often, the people in the field were seeking broadly based expertise with no particular focus on a staff person's previous competency. Rather, people in the field were responding to a kind of generalized availablity and apparent confidence that some kind of help would ensue. Very often, the activity that ensued was that of the NEPTE staff person directing the individual or group to a resource where the service or resource was readily available. It was rare that the NEPTE

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staff person performed the function himself. It is clear in retrospect that during the earlier time, NEPTE staff members were heavily used by people in the field for the kinds of resources they thought such roving personnel should be in touch with. The transaction is easier to watch presently because the scope of vision has narrowed somewhat; that is, the field agents carry with them a particular label indicating a specific expertise. Their presence makes clear a part of the function that NEPTE staff fulfills external to the projects and planned NEPTE activities.

Recruitment

Because of the usual delay in processing a federal grant, NEPTE and the states were unable to begin a serious search for candidates until mid and late spring. Announcements of vacancies and job descriptions were sent to the placement offices of major schools of education, professional organizations, and publications.

The returns, as is the case in the present job market, were considerable with over three hundred responses. Some Board members and all staff carefully screened the applications. In each case, a long pattern of interview and negotiations ensued. Each candidate had to be acceptable not only to NEPTE but to the respective state as well. Finally, in September -- two months after the hoped for date of July 1, 1972 -- all six field agents were on the job.

The Work Itself

The tasks of each of the field agents, as outlined in the proposal, are impossible. The broadly written job descriptions were the results of state department and NEPTE personnel conferences. Written to include the views of

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all, they awaited the performance of individuals in order to attain some focus and closure.

NEPTE's experience with the two field agents in 1971-72 had evidenced the impossibility of fully delineating the field agent's role, if he were to function effectively. A large block of the first two field agents' time was spent on tasks not originally thought of as their tasks. The Rhode Island field agent, for instance, spent over seven full working days responding minimally to regional interests in Performance Based Teacher Education. The Maine field agent spent time helping several groups develop an effective representative project board for funded programs.

There are ways in which all NEPTE staff have acted like field agents, a fact which made initial staff interaction easier because a common experience existed. In the early months of the program, the director and associate director were busily attempting to respond to regionally stated needs and questions while at the same time they were attempting to launch some of NEPTE's early programs. NEPTE was a new resource for the region, and indeed many people treated it like a resource to be used. They sent letters, made inquiries, and requested staff visits. If each of the twenty-four member Board told only two people about NEPTE, there was an immediate potential of 48 visits for a staff of two. Each Board member, in fact, told more than two. The central staff of two quickly evolved a style of responding to requests that has become characteristic of NEPTE and, in part, helped shape the Field Agent Proposal. When the staff felt that a request was both germane to NEPTE's purposes and appropriate to staff skills, then a direct, active on-site response was made. When a request was relevant to NEPTE but not in line with staff competencies or interests, then staff sought appropriate help in the region. Follow-up to these

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assisting moves was made, and over time a list of effective resource people has been accumulated. On still other occasions, staff mentally stored the request for help and then surfaced it again when several similar inquiries were made, thus indicating a regional interest, problem, or opportunity. The concern for Open Education would be an example of the last practice, starting with a question early in the year, developing into a listing of "Open Concept" schools, and resulting in a regional conference on Open Education. That first year taught NEPTE staff that the six New England states would probably continue unwittingly to make impossible demands on staff time, that new staff members should not consider themselves only as experts in a particular competency or residents of a particular state, and that people flexible enough to fill multiple roles could accomplish many tasks while ostensibly doing one.

The field agent role, then, is one that has evolved from NEPTE's own original staff roles. The addition of field agents theoretically makes it possible to extend the activities of the original staff three-fold.

A Closer Look

What, specifically, do field agents do? The following description is a fairly typical ten-day sequence for a NEPTE field agent. The events described occurred with ten consecutive days of work for one field agent. (A) One and one-half days spent with a state department of education officer and representatives of all teacher education institutions in the state. The field agent was in a quasi-consultant role during that time as the group considered changes in procedures for approval of teacher education programs in the state. (B) One day in another state during which the field agent met with two NEPTE project directors, the dean of education at a major institution, and several superintendents. Topics included proposed changes

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in pre-service programs, personnel selection for site roles, and a proposal for secondary school teacher training. (C) Attendance at a NEPTE Board meeting. (D) Meetings with another dean of a school of education, a project steering committee, and two project directors. (E) Two days in the office spent in wirting notes and reports regarding all the meetings that had taken place.

Of the activities described, only the writing of the notes reached any closure. The other experiences all ended on an ambiguous note; some with an indication of the need for another meeting, others with a request for materials and services, still others were more momentary meetings perhaps related to some past or future program development effort and perhaps not. Each of them filled a need for the person or agency served, for often the action occurred because someone had requested it. But one of the ambiguities of some of the service roles in NEPTE is precisely the lack of closure, the oftentimes uncertainty with regard to the success of the intervention. Very often the indication of success or failure becomes clear only when a subsequent follow-up activity is held. If the NEPTE agent is invited, he can usually feel it is a result of his performance at the first activity. If he is not invited to participate? He can ignore it; he can feel a sense of failure and attempt to analyze it; he can take credit for having helped the process get as far as it has. Whatever he does to either face the fact of failure or look for excuses, he must recognize that not all interventions are going to be successful.

The primary point, though, is that the field agent must be self-starting and self-sustaining to a very high degree. Very often he will get little assistance in beginning to work out a problem and little direct encouragement, praise, or reward as an activity moves from vision to fullfillment. Others will expect a high degree of the ability to sustain oneself in

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difficulties. Finally, the client will anticipate direct immediate professional participation and contributions from the field agent.

The effectiveness of the field agents has depended in part on the training and early experiences; more important, though, are those characteristics they brought to the job as part of their past. The following are a listing of characteristics that were used as criteria in the selection process:

(a) Tolerance for ambiguity: the role of a field agent, however completely a proposal will describe it, will be an undefined one in the initial stages. Because he will be working out of a small staff, peer and organizational support and role definition will be minimal. Such situations are at best ambiguous. In general, this characteristic was assessed largely through an analysis of candidates' previous work experiences. People with a history of low risk jobs, for instance, were judged to be unlikely to possess high tolerance for ambiguity.

(b) Recognition and avoidance of hierarchical limitations: A field agent works in all the levels of an educational hierarchy and must thus be aware of the real and imagined levels. Yet his function is to serve all levels; thus he must be neither the tool of the higher levels nor the advocate of the lower levels. Rather, he must work in such a way as to be useful to all. He must see himself as serving a function rather than being a level on an imagined hierarchy. Again, this was assessed in terms of previous roles as well as, of course, candidate statements. NEPTE was seeking individuals who had learned to live in conflicting authority environments.

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(c) Area of expertise: A field agent ought to have a recognizable skill in which he himself has confidence. This attribute is highly valuable in demonstrating specific competencies. He must also possess the quality of not being skill-bound; that is, he must be able to move into other areas of competency as well as to see the transfer aspects of his own skill. This turned out to be the thing the candidate went back to for examples and illustrations in the open interview structure used. In several cases this turned out to be quite different from what the candidates' papers had indicated.

(d) Respect for the potential of educational studies and research combined with skepticism of much research: A field agent must have a trust that not all inventions need to be redone because he knows that some research efforts have produced substantial results. At the same time he must be sufficiently prudent to know that many studies have produced no answers. This quality proved difficult to assess. The apparent success in terms of finding people with this quality may be as much a result of the kinds of people who sought NWREL as it was the result of any conscious strategy.

(e) Demonstrated ability and desire to work with people cooperatively: While in one sense a field agent works in a lonely environment, he is constantly interacting with people and carefully listening to them at varying ranges of closeness and cooperation. This interaction must be characterized by the agent's preference, not his tolerance. This quality was assessed largely through interviews and the interaction there.

(f) Acceptance of postponed gratification: A field agent rarely has the teacher's satisfaction of daily feedback on tasks. He must be able to function as a self-starter relying on his own initiative for continuation of activity. This quality was visible in terms of the kinds of tasks and role that candidates had previously sought for themselves.

NEPTE field agents have had a training experience that characterized the training given earlier appointed staff: a few meetings and planning sessions followed quickly by total immersion in the field. The field agents have had a series of one-on-one placements throughout the region with some of the district elements that compose the agent's constituency. The intention was to develop an experience that will force the issues of the year-long experience to the surface. They have also had short-term stays in several centers or programs in the region. Verbal and written reports after the facts between field agents and central staff are maintained continuously and intensively.

What Has Been Learned

These remarks are being written at the mid-point of the second year of Field Agent activity. The question of what has been learned is appropriate.

Some of the learnings have been things we thought we would learn. It was predicted that the amount of time an agent spent in the state and on NEPTE tasks would vary somewhat from state to state and also be something that states would increasingly attempt to control. To a degree, this has happened. Field agents have, as predicted, leaned in whichever direction they felt their own long-term development has lain. Tabbed with a

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label of a particular skill, they have not become involved in a wide range of activities in their respective states. Demands on central staff time have been at least as great as in the past with the result that large blocks of time to spend with field agents have not been available.

These are more negative learnings. There have been positive ones as well. It has been learned that given sufficient sanction, status and support, a field agent will develop a powerful array of practices, constitutents, products, and functions. A specific illustration: one of the field agents has developed a presentation including text and visuals of his competency area; planned jointly with state department personnel the holding of three workshops and conferences; assisted the state committee on teacher certification; served as a frequent resource in the two neighboring states. All the activities, in addition to the normal duties, took place within the past two months.

NEPTE has learned that its impact, in the sense of being widely known as a participant and contributor, is immeasurably enhanced by the addition of field agents who attend numerous functions for a variety of reasons. Curiously, they are identified as "NEPTE people" which, of course, achieves this desired spread of influence factor.

Finally, it has been learned for the three millioneth time in human history that program quality is related to person quality. The dual assignment of personnel to both NEPTE and a state could provide a marvelous disguise for inactivity by claiming to be busy for either organization. NEPTE's chief good fortune has been in securing as field agents six individuals who have well served two masters.

Further Directions

In addition to the Field Agent Project, NEPTE has over twenty other projects in New England. A significant result of the field agent activity is behavior change in some project directors. They have begun to develop activities in which they go to other projects for training and support. In an informal sense, NEPTE has ten other field agents.

All six states have indicated an interest in continuing the relationship, and the state commissioners have signed a proposal for 1973-74, requesting the same kind of project. There were other things that could have been done with the money; the choice of the states to continue the development of field agents is a positive endorsement of the first year's activities.

It is pretty clear that nobody should consider a twenty-year career as a field agent. The demands, the travel, and the continued lack of closure would probably be debilitating in the long run. But for an early and mid-career position, it has many advantages. For an organization, seeking to broaden its sphere of influence, it is an admirable vehicle. For a group of communities or states seeking to share information, practices, and resources with an agency, it is a workable arrangement.

The Last Word

One of the NEPTE staff, in a reflective and whimsical way, recently described a field agent's activities in a paper called "A Day in the Life of a Field Agent." It is as appropriate a point to end as any.

A Day in the Life of a Field Agent

I awoke to see the sun rising over a meadow in one of the three northern states. Breakfast was at 8:00 am with a project director and one of his people. The topic of the meeting had been vaguely referred to the evening before (11:00 pm) when the project director finally dropped me off at the motel.

The other person -- whom I had not previously met -- arrived first. I

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recognized him by his bright inquiring eyes. Another method I used was the who-the-hell-else-would-be-here-at-7:45 am with-a-briefcase-in-his-hand and a-forlorn-look-on-his-face one. I have found this a useful way to recognize strangers in strange motels. I worked; it was George. I introduced myself; and we sat down to await Bill, the project director. What do you say at 7:45 am to someone you have never met before? I usually say something about George McGovern or Richard Nixon. This morning I said something about George McGovern.

We chatted a bit and I was able to deliver what I hoped would be the first of my great lines that day: "Look, I'm no chauvinist, but America is the only country I have." Having established my potential for uttering the bon mot, I was ready to go to breakfast when Bill showed up.

The breakfast meeting quickly became a business meeting as George, between bites of sausages and eggs, explained how he would like to vary his role next year within the NEPTE funded program. When he forgot something, Bill would prompt him. After two eggs, four toasts, three cups of coffee and two sausages, George laid his knife and fork down and said, "Well, that's it." I looked at Bill to see what else would be offered. Bill said, "Yeah, that's about it." They looked at me for some sort of response and I looked for the waitress for some more coffee.

One hour later, I had asked about fifteen questions, made five or six directive observations like, "It seems to me, purely as an outsider, that you would appear less patronizing if . . ." The questions were ones like: "Who is being trained to fill your role when you tire of it?" Or "How many teachers have said they like this idea?" At the end of the hour, we reached an agreement that George was going to produce a three-page statement describing his plan, indicating its supposed advantages. Bill and he would meet again with me and then present the idea to the steering committee or abandon the plan or modify it or whatever action seemed appropriate.

The rest of the day was spent in visiting with two different school superintendents talking out the implications of a new state plan, some ways the NEPTE project could effect change, and some local problems.

What was the day worth and how had it come about? Let me answer the last question first. It had probably come about because of a relationship of trust and affection built up over the last year. In this case the director was not asking my presence because of the expectation of funds. At one point during the day he observed that "getting ten bucks out of him (me) is like getting blood from a stone." (I winced at his metaphor but applauded his sentiment.) The day had been carefully constructed so as to place me in three key meetings and provide much time for reactive statements towards the end of each meeting. My guess is that this occurred because of (a) a trust relationship built on respect and past contributions, (b) a local need for responsive outside input, (c) an outside sanction of sorts for the director's role, (d) a clear expectation of a specific statement from the field agent based on past experience.

Was the day worthwhile? This is an impossible question to answer specifically. The three meetings ended amicably with thanks expressed. A subsequent product in the way of a paper or a proposal or a workshop is anticipated in each case. I learned a considerable amount about rural

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school systems and their strengths and weaknesses. Another series of relationships for NEPTE was furthered. (Question: with a staff of ten, who needs further relationships?)

The personal qualities necessary for such a day are as follows: (1) Inordinate patience with the necessarily slow detailing of the various "stories," (2) Clear listening skills as evidenced by an occasional interruption for clarity or emphasis; (3) Willingness to forego temporary leadership in "obvious" solution situations for long-term relationships; (4) Skill in succinct, clear exposition of one's own point of view when appropriate; (5) Acceptance of a lack of closure with regard to the value of one's own role in such meetings; (6) Tolerance for being used for such purposes as a sounding board, a reactor, and sometimes a neuter.

The day ended when I drove into my driveway; it was raining by that time. The day really ended when, minutes later, my wife said: "What did you do today, dear?" I dunno; I dunno.